

Nationline

Looking ahead

Karzai, Musharraf to dine at White House

President Bush, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf meet today for dinner at the White House. Bush's guests have been at odds over each country's efforts to hunt terrorists and to stop them from crossing their shared border. Bush said everyone wants to see Osama bin Laden and other terrorist leaders brought to justice. "Our interests coincide," Bush said. Meeting, 10A.

Also today:

► The jury in the federal racketeering trial of John "Junior" Gotti returns for a seventh day of deliberations in New York. The judge encouraged the jury to continue deliberations after it said it was deadlocked. Two previous trials ended with hung juries.

Across the nation

Older Boston tunnel needs major repairs

A transportation review prompted by a deadly collapse in a "Big Dig" tunnel has found cracks that will require major repairs to an older tunnel under Boston Harbor, Gov. Mitt Romney said Tuesday.



Romney: Sumner Tunnel has cracks.

The Summer Tunnel won't close immediately, and repair work probably won't begin until summer at the earliest, he said. But he said there could have been "a real safety failure" had the problems gone unchecked.

The tunnel opened in 1934 but had a major overhaul in the 1990s. Needed repairs will require lane closures at the least, he said.

Romney said the work won't begin until after officials are able to reopen portions of the \$14.6 billion Big Dig project that were closed in July after ceiling panels fell in the Interstate 90 tunnel and crushed a car, killing a woman.

Ohio family sues after eating spinach

Five Ohio family members who said they were sickened after eating fresh spinach sued a processing company that is under investigation in the search for the source of the tainted greens. The lawsuit seeks \$100,000 in damages from Natural Selection Foods. Roger Drummond and Laura Snider, of Bowling Green, said they and their three children became ill in August and September after eating packages of organic spinach salad. Natural Selection Foods, based in San Juan Bautista, Calif., has recalled more than 30 brands.

Meanwhile, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said more bags of spinach tainted with E. coli bacteria were found in Pennsylvania, Illinois and Ohio.

Law limiting funeral protests tossed out

Kentucky's law forbidding protests within 300 feet of military funerals was suspended after a federal judge ruled it was too broad.

The law passed this year was aimed at members of a Topeka church who have protested at military funerals nationwide. The Westboro Baptist Church claims the soldiers' deaths are a sign of God punishing America for tolerating homosexuality. Several states have similar laws, and Congress passed a law this year prohibiting protests at military funerals at federal cemeteries. Kentucky Attorney General Greg Stumbo said he would consider an appeal.



By Larry Downing, Reuters

WWI soldier laid to rest

In Arlington National Cemetery: A French military representative consoles Rachel Kleisinger, a descendant of WWI Army Pvt. Francis Lupo. He was killed near Soissons, France, on July 21, 1918. His remains were recently identified after being found in 2003.

Trial begins in bus blast that killed 23

The operator of a bus that exploded and killed 23 nursing home residents during the Hurricane Rita evacuation poorly maintained his vehicles and had drivers work long shifts and lie about them, federal prosecutor John Kinchen said in his opening statement at the trial in McAllen, Texas.

Charles Banker, a lawyer for James Maples, said his client was innocent and accused prosecutors of taking a "shoot first, we'll pick up the pieces later" approach. Maples, 67, is president and director of Global Limo. He and his company are accused of conspiring to falsify driver time records and failing to inspect buses to ensure their safety. Thirty-seven nursing home residents were on the bus when it caught fire Sept. 23, 2005, on a freeway near Dallas. Many were disabled and unable to escape.

On Deadline: What others are saying

Federal aid financing video games?

The misuse of credit cards by some employees of the Dallas school district has meant that federal money intended for low-income students instead has been spent on such items as video game systems and "throw blankets for staffers," *The Dallas Morning News* reported (dallasnews.com).

Since July, the newspaper has published a series of articles about alleged misuse of the school district's credit cards. In an earlier report, it said its investigation shows that "with little oversight, Dallas Independent School District employees swipe their district-issued credit cards hundreds of times a day, spending about \$20 million a year on everything from office supplies and textbooks to meals and giveaway trinkets."

School district officials have declined to comment on the evidence concerning funds for low-income students, the newspaper has reported.

Superintendent Michael Hinojosa, though, has unveiled a five-point plan aimed at improving the district's financial accountability and enforcing ethical purchasing guidelines.

— Mark Memmott

By John Bacon with staff and wire reports

Please recycle

Nation

Two Sago miners kill themselves

Unclear if W.Va. disaster was factor

By Emily Bazar
USA TODAY

Two West Virginia miners who were at the site of a deadly blast that ripped through the Sago Mine early this year committed suicide in the past month.

John Nelson Boni, a fireboss, and William Lee Chisolm, a dispatcher, were questioned by investigators in the aftermath of the Jan. 2 explosion, which led to the deaths of 12 of their coworkers.

Neither was blamed in the tragedy, and police said it's not clear why they committed suicide. But J. Davitt McAteer, West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin's

adviser on the accident, said such incidents weigh heavily on those involved.

"Traumatic events have a long-lasting effect on people," McAteer said. "We have to be careful and conscious of this fact and provide as much counseling and support as we can."

Five days before the explosion, Boni detected methane building up in a sealed area of the mine and reported it to a foreman, McAteer said. "He did what he was supposed to do," he said.

State police were called to Boni's home in Volga early Saturday. They found him dead of a gunshot to the head, said Sgt. James Merrill. He'd been

talking to his father-in-law on the phone when the father-in-law heard a shot.

His ex-wife, Vickie Boni, said she doesn't know why he killed himself but the tragedy "continued to bother him."

They had contact occasionally through their three children, she said. A son was also working at the Sago Mine the day of the explosion and was not injured. He has since left the job.

"He's the type of person who was for his men at work," Vickie Boni said of her ex-husband. "He didn't expect his men to do anything that he wouldn't do."

Friends and family said Boni retired shortly after the accident.

Chisolm told investigators that a carbon monoxide alarm sounded about 20 minutes before the explosion, but he

thought it was malfunctioning, McAteer said. Investigators are satisfied that the alarm probably wasn't related to the cause of the explosion, he said.

On Aug. 29, Randolph County sheriff's officers found Chisolm dead from a gunshot wound in his Harding-area home, Deputy Lee Wright said.

The mine's owner, International Coal Group, said Chisolm had taken a leave of absence but remained an employee. "We believe that Mr. Chisolm was a very good, hard-working employee," ICG spokesman Ira Gamm said.

ICG provided grief counseling to Sago employees after the accident and has renewed the offer.

Contributing: The Associated Press

Old-fashioned land scams go high-tech

Florida swamps, Texas wasteland going once, twice ... sold online!

By Haya El Nasser
USA TODAY

An elderly woman from the East Coast roams the Arizona desert in search of her land. She's looking for a tidy lot in a subdivision and instead finds an arid wasteland in the middle of nowhere. She gets lost, runs out of gas and water and has to be rescued by a rancher.

She had bought the land on the Internet, sight unseen, according to Mary Utley, spokeswoman with the Arizona Department of Real Estate.

The Internet is reviving a grand old American tradition: land scams. Thousands of lots in phantom subdivisions that were sold decades ago to people who hoped to build retirement homes in warm states are reappearing on online sites such as the Internet giant eBay.

The new wave of land scams has the potential to snooker millions more around the world because of the Internet's broad and instantaneous reach.

Many of the lots being sold have never been developed because they are on swampland in Florida or isolated desert ranchland in Texas and Arizona. There is no road access, water or power. The land might be developed someday, but county officials who are busy processing a surge in deed transfers are skeptical.

"If someone does buy one of these parcels thinking they're going to build their dream home on it now, that's really a problem," says Bart Medley, attorney for Texas' Jeff Davis County.

Land scams are surfacing in: ► **Florida.** The state has a long history of bogus land deals. In Flagler County, a scam that began in the 1970s was revived recently when the same lots in a subdivision that has yet to be built appeared on eBay. Some paid \$5,000 for parcels worth \$500, Daytona Beach land-use lawyer Glenn Storch says.

► **West Texas.** Land there is plentiful, but not always hospi-



By J.R. Hernandez for USA TODAY

Acres for sale: Kit Bramblett, attorney for Hudspeth County, surveys land in Sierra Blanca, Texas, that is being auctioned on websites.

table. Arid acreage in Jeff Davis, Hudspeth and Culberson counties has been auctioned online to some unsuspecting buyers.

"Much of the property was advertised with photos showing things like running water, green trees and green grass — things that simply don't exist in that particular location," Medley says.

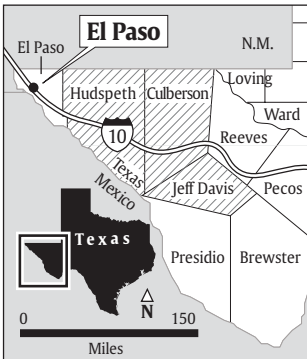
► **Arizona.** "A huge problem," says Utley, whose agency monitors real estate agents and developers. "We actually don't even have enough staff to address it."

'Between buyer and seller'

Most online land auctions are legitimate and much of the land sold can be developed. Interspersed among those listings, however, are offers for 2-acre and 5-acre lots tagged as "investment property."

Online sites say they just provide the vehicle to list properties. "The actual transaction happens directly between the buyer and seller," says Catherine England, spokeswoman for eBay, which lists and auctions properties in its real estate section.

In the 1960s, large land companies set up sales kiosks in cities around the world such as Hong Kong or Singapore, Storch



USA TODAY

says, "but you had to come to the kiosk to hear the sales pitch." Now, all of it can be done online from the comfort of home and at any hour in any time zone.

Medley has gotten calls from as far away as Belgium.

There is nothing illegal about selling worthless land to someone who's willing to pay. The key is to tell them what they're getting, Storch says.

West Texas is particularly attractive to land-scam artists. There is plenty of land, and county governments are small and ill-equipped to crack down.

The county clerk in Jeff Davis County is processing dozens of deed transfers on ranchland that can't be reached by car. The same lots were sold years ago to unsuspecting buyers

who stopped paying property taxes when they realized they owned a worthless patch of dirt. The county took possession and sold the lots in one chunk. The new owner is selling the lots online.

Tough to prosecute

"We're going to wind up taking some of these plots back," Medley says. "Eventually, we'll have to clean up the mess. ... These scams are defrauding people out of their hard-earned money."

Kit Bramblett, county attorney in neighboring Hudspeth County, says cracking down on bad sales is tough.

"Even though I can't find your land out there, I can't find any laws that will allow me to jump on anybody," he says. "I can't make a criminal act out of that."

Some of the Internet sales listings make it clear that the land can't be built on unless the owners find a way to supply water, sewer service and electricity. Others don't. Many tantalize with beautiful descriptions and pictures.

Medley cites the old adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but "I want to meet the person who looks at this (land) and thinks it's beautiful."

Copper thieves get killed cutting into power lines

High price sends crooks on quest for quick buck

By Wendy Koch
USA TODAY

At least seven men in five states have been fatally electrocuted since July while hacking through power lines to steal wire made of copper, which has been commanding near-record prices, police say.

"It is a growing problem with the rise in the price of metals," says Lt. Shea Smith of the Greenville County Sheriff's Office in South Carolina. Smith says one thief died Aug. 30 and another July 7. Both were found with wire cutters and other tools that suggested their intent. He says at least 30 more copper thefts have occurred in the county so far this year.

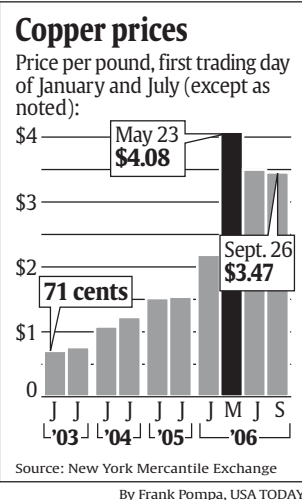
Nationwide, police report copper thieves stealing wires from air conditioning units, exposed pipes from underneath homes, vases from graveyards in Sumter, S.C., and bells from a church in Yonkers, N.Y.

"It's surprising to find two deaths in such a short time frame," Shea says. "Most people who steal copper find the easiest way to do it," such as taking it from a construction site.

"It's three (deaths) this year alone" in Detroit, says 2nd Deputy Chief James Tate of the city's police. On Monday, he says, the body of Walter Marihugh, 24, was discovered after he apparently tried to cut cables from a public lighting box in a vacant lot. Tate

says a similar electrocution occurred two months ago and a third earlier in the year.

Police have reported three deaths since July in Fort Worth, Pineville, W.Va., and Aurora, Colo. There are no national figures, but the number of copper thefts and related deaths is "probably at the highest level it's ever been," says Kenneth Geremia, spokesman for the Copper Development Association, a trade group. He says copper is completely recyclable and can sell for \$3 a pound at scrap yards. Demand from China, India



caused the deaths of two thieves in Boone County, W.Va., and Pike County, Ky.

"It's very difficult" to tell if scrap copper is stolen, because much of it is very commonly used material, says Bryan McGannon, spokesman for the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, an association of 3,000 scrap yards. He says workers are trained to look for stolen items, and his group alerts scrap dealers by e-mail of large thefts.

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